“You Bitches Wouldn’t Get It”: Queer Ludonarrativity in Lil Nas X’s “Late To Da Party (F*CK BET)”

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Released on June 24, 2022, the music video for “Late To Da Party (F*CK BET)” (featuring YoungBoy Never Broke Again and directed by Gibson Hazard) was part of Lil Nas X’s public pushback against what he viewed as homophobia from Black Entertainment Television (BET), the cable television network that targets Black audiences and hosts the BET Awards that honors primarily Black entertainers. When award nominees were released on June 1 of that year, the rapper expressed his disappointment at receiving “an outstanding zero nominations,” despite having had several hits during the preceding year including “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)” and “INDUSTRY BABY” (“Lil Nas X Takes Direct Aim at BET”). Along with the video’s release, Lil Nas X also took to Twitter to criticize the network, suggesting in now deleted tweets that the lack of nominations was an example of homophobia in the music industry, stating “I just feel like black gay ppl have to fight to be seen in this world and even when we make it to the top mfs [motherfuckers] try to pretend we are invisible” (“Lil Nas X Takes Direct Aim”). The release of the “Late To Da Party” video was an explicit assertion of the rapper’s Black queer resistance.

“Late To Da Party” demonstrates Lil Nas X’s generational pushback against stalwarts of Black mainstream culture and a rejection of the images of Blackness purveyed by BET since its inception in the 1980s. But, like many of his other videos, this criticism is expressed through modes of narrativity that combine generational influences, particularly as they relate to new digital media, and queer modes of critique. Lil Nas X often engages with an assemblage of sounds, words,

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and images that rely on cartoon and video game-influenced narratives and aesthetics, resulting in a sometimes playful engagement with Black queer sexuality and trolling of homophobic conservatives. This approach reflects a Gen Z application of Tison Pugh's concept of queer ludonarratology in which "queer identities can emerge from the margins of the textual game or of the ludic text into the open" (5). I argue that, with its video game references and structure, "Late To Da Party" illustrates Lil Nas X's use of queer ludonarratology to combat homophobia and industry gatekeeping.

In what follows I discuss Lil Nas X's engagement with online culture, particularly in his process of publicly coming out and his use of social media to push back against homophobia. I then explore the aesthetics of his visual and online materials, which reflect his queer and generational identities. Finally, I offer a close descriptive reading of the "Late To Da Party" video as a queer ludonarrative that illustrates the influences of internet and gaming cultures on the queer Gen Z hip hop artist. I seek to demonstrate how Lil Nas X's engagement with internet, gaming, and television cultures in hip hop reflects the shifting attitudes and aesthetics of a post-Obama generation.

Hip hop has had a long relationship with video games, which is reflected in many different aspects of both cultures. There are songs that reference video games such as DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's "Human Video Game" (1988); songs that sample video game sounds like Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's "Eternal" (1995), which samples a theme from the Sega Genesis game *Eternal Champions* (1993); hip hop-themed games such as the *Def Jam* series (starting with *Def Jam Vendetta* in 2003) and *50 Cent: Bulletproof* (2005); and games with hip hop soundtracks (including the *Grand Theft Auto* series). Lil Nas X contributes to this history of rap and video game association while introducing narrative elements that emphasize queer identity and thereby challenge real or imagined homophobia in hip hop and popular culture more generally.

Theorists have used the term queer of color critique to refer to the ways queer subjects of color call attention to and refuse to abide by heteronormative expectations within their fields. Queer of color critique is also a theoretical subfield of queer studies that seeks to understand this phenomenon through an intersectional framework that interrogates power structures connected to race, gender, sexuality, class, nationhood, and other social formations. As Roderick A. Ferguson, drawing on José Esteban Muñoz, argues:

queer of color critique decodes cultural fields not from a position outside

> those fields, but from within them, as those fields account for the queer of color subject's historicity. If the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class constitute social formations within liberal capitalism, then queer of color analysis obtains its genealogy within a variety of locations (Ferguson 4).

Lil Nas X is part of the cultural field of hip hop, which has a history of engaging with video game cultures, but his methods of critique and his aesthetics reflect several genealogies, including a longer lineage of Black queer music-making, as well as internet, television, and gaming media, all of which coalesce in his work in a way that reflects his own generational position. Furthermore, queer of color critique addresses culture "not as the reflection of the social but as an active participant in the constitution of the social world" (Ferguson 2018). Lil Nas X's queer world-making demonstrates this very type of active engagement. "Late To Da Party," then, can be read as a queer of color critique that utilizes queer ludonarrativity to decode from within hip hop culture and from a specific generational position.

Digital Media Landscapes and Gen Z Aesthetics

Social and other internet media have been important sources and tools for Lil Nas X's public self-fashioning prior to "Late To Da Party." Indeed, his earliest successes resulted from his strategic engagement with platforms such as SoundCloud and TikTok (Yglesias). Ole J. Mjos has traced the significance of online platforms such as MySpace and YouTube (and, later, Facebook and Twitter) for musicians since the late-2000s, noting that even artists without strong corporate backing had access to fans through these platforms which therefore became significant tools for marketing and promotion. In addition to giving access to a wide base of users, the global social media environment also provided ways that media could be integrated across platforms—embedding music videos into social media posts or profile pages, for example, as well as cross-linking profiles across various sites helped musicians share their work as well as construct a public identity.

By the mid-2010s, artists had embraced this new digital media environment to promote their work. A striking example is the surprise release and subsequent viral popularity of Beyoncé's first visual album, the self-titled *BEYONCÉ* (2013). As Paula Harper notes, while Beyoncé and her team relied heavily on social

media as “key sites of circulation, discourse, and meaning-making for the album” (61), the project was supported by an exclusive corporate partnership with iTunes, and therefore was “less of a radical departure from industry norms than its surrounding furor made it seem” (75). Mjos points out that, in the early years of digital internet media, commercially mainstream artists such as Beyoncé had more access to corporate collaborations with “major internet portals AOL, MSN, and Yahoo! to promote their music,” but social media platforms such as MySpace “marked the arrival of a marketing tool for these smaller and unsigned bands and often provided a way for them to link with fans” (61). The accessibility of evolving social media has been quickly adapted by “Digital Natives” – people born after 1980 – but for the newest generation of adults, Generation Z (Gen Z, those born after 1996), the world has not existed without social media (Palfrey and Gasser).[1] For artists in this generation, then, the line between social media platforms as marketing tools and as social sites for connection and self-expression is often blurred, and as such musicians in these groups tend to use the platforms differently.

Like his predecessors, Lil Nas X uses social media to market his latest music. Unlike older artists, though, his online engagement is seemingly less driven by corporate collaborations and more an organic evolution from online user into professional musician. This is not to say that his online content is not carefully thought out or curated, but it pushes against ideas of professionalism and respectability that older artists cultivated in their online profiles. Lil Nas X is adept at social media in the way that only a Gen Z digital native could be, and in addition to marketing music, he also uses platforms as a space for playful engagement and political and social critique.

Most notably, Lil Nas X used social media to publicly come out as queer in June 2019. In tweets that gestured toward his earlier work, especially lyrics for his song “C7osure” and artwork for the EP *7*, he suggested that he had already been open about his queer sexuality and that his fans had failed to interpret his codes. He has also used social media, in tandem with music videos and other online content, to engage in “trolling.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* added the following definition of “trolling” in its internet context in June 2006: “To post a deliberately erroneous or antagonistic message on a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response.” Whitney Phillips

[1] “Digital Natives” is a term used by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser to refer to the generations who have always engaged with technology, especially the internet, since they were young.

writes that “trolling can be nasty, outrageous business… that is, in fact, the entire exercise: to disrupt and upset as many people as possible, using whatever linguistic or behavioral tools available” (2). While Phillips’ study, like much of the discourse around trolling, focuses on what she calls “subcultural trolling,” that is largely white male internet users who often engage in racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism, Lil Nas X uses similar methods to push back against this kind of discrimination, instead poking fun of the folks who would perpetuate it. For example, in 2021 the rapper collaborated with MSCHF, a Brooklyn, New York-based art collective to release “Satan Shoes,” 666 pairs of customized Nike Air Max 97s that featured satanic imagery and, supposedly, a drop of human blood in each sole as part of a tie-in with the music video for “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)” (“Lil Nas X Satan Shoes Will Be Recalled”). Nike successfully sued MSCHF for trademark infringement, a case that Lil Nas X then parodied in a teaser trailer video for his “INDUSTRY BABY” video a few months later. This integrated approach to parody and social commentary across his media is indicative of his attempts to troll conservatives. Rather than trolling in the traditional sense by posting inflammatory statements in comment sections of social media posts, Lil Nas X trolls through his online videos and other multimedia. In so doing, he engages in a sort of playful approach to digital media, even if the potential consequences for a young Black queer rapper could be seriously detrimental to him personally and to his career.

Music videos have also been an important medium through which Lil Nas X engages with social commentary and queerness. Since his public coming-out, many of his videos have been explicitly queer, a clear shift from the difficult-to-decipher queerness embedded in his earlier work. “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)” and “INDUSTRY BABY,” for example, feature largely linear narratives that unambiguously highlight queer themes and identities. Lil Nas X approaches this digital media landscape through an embodied bricolage indicative of the aesthetic practices of his generation. He pulls from various influences including internet, film, and television medias, drawing particularly on the queer potential or queer counter-readings of this source material.

Among these influences is the long-running Nickelodeon animated show, *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Unlike typical examples of children’s television (both live-action and animated), *SpongeBob* is noteworthy for its refusal to adhere strictly to traditional binary gender roles and expressions and has been lauded for its positive portrayals of gender and sexual variance (Dennis). For example,

Claire Burdfield writes:

> SpongeBob powerfully resists the concepts of both biological and social determinism, and is a flexible canvas that possesses the inherent potentiality to perform different gender roles, and drop them at will. As a biologically asexual being (that is, an organism that reproduces asexually and therefore lacks a biological sex), SpongeBob resists categorization or restriction due to biological determinism, but SpongeBob SquarePants highlights, and ultimately critiques, the role social determinism plays in limiting the amount of agency individuals have in expressing their own gender identity (196).

Indeed, this queer potential has also made the show a target for conservative Christian groups, such as James Dobson's *Focus on the Family*, which weaponized *SpongeBob* under the guise of "protecting children" from its so-called "homosexual agenda" (Zingsheim). Dobson referenced the show using homophobic rhetoric in a newsletter to his followers in 2005, during a time when LGBTQ civil rights were becoming a mainstream cultural and legislative issue, particularly around the legal cases of marriage equality and the repeal of "Don't Ask Don't Tell."[2] Lil Nas X was born less than a month before the first episode of *SpongeBob* aired on television on May 1, 1999, and would have been around six years old when the newsletter was published—the target age demographic of the cartoon. As the Pew Research Center has shown, Gen Zers are driving rapidly changing ideas about gender identity, and are much more open to gender expansive language and identities (Parker and Igielnik).[3] Increasing and increasingly diverse media representation of LGBTQ identities both drive and reflect these shifts. As such, it is not surprising that both the inclusive cartoon and the backlash against it would have influenced Lil Nas X from a young age.

In some cases, the aesthetic influences of *SpongeBob* have been apparent and acknowledged by the artist and are largely visual in nature. For example, Lil Nas X confirmed that the cartoon was an influence for his onstage marching band-inspired outfit for the 2021 MTV Video Music Awards and suggested that

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[2] "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the official United States Department of Defense policy from 1994 until 2011 that banned openly LGBTQ people from serving in the military.

[3] While not all Gen Zers are queer or gender expansive, a recent Gallop poll found that about 21% of adults in this generation identify as LGBT, which is almost twice the number as the preceding generation, millennials (Jones). There are, of course, homo- and transphobic Gen Zers, but proportionally there are much fewer than in preceding generations, which is a marked shift.

the show also inspired the cover art for his first full-length album, *Montero* (Frishberg). *SpongeBob* and other contemporary Nickelodeon shows may also have contributed, along with other influences, to Lil Nas X's sense of camp, particularly as a queer mode of expression. Sarah Banet-Weiser notes that the camp style of some children's television programming, especially *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Ren & Stimpy*, and *The Fairly OddParents*, is "a particular kind of consumer strategy" that "harnesses a political ideology – gay identity politics, queer theory – and commodify it as an aesthetic practice" (36-7). Lil Nas X intuitively identifies this connection between cartoon camp aesthetic and queer practice and uses it to fashion a queer hip hop style.

Lil Nas X's camp influences are not just from children's media, however. We can also situate his aesthetic as part of a lineage of another rapper known for her camp approach: Nicki Minaj. Almost a year after coming out as queer, Lil Nas X came out as a "barb," a fan of the female rapper, stating in a Twitter exchange that he had previously denied running a Nicki Minaj fan account when he was younger because he did not want to be perceived as gay, subtly noting the link between queerness and male fandom of female stars. As Uri McMillan has explained, camp has long been avoided as an analytic from which to examine works by Black artists, whether they are queer, but Nicki Minaj's early work resituates camp as a Black female-centered practice. He coins the term "Nicki-aesthetics" to reflect her style:

> A form of black performance art that employs an extravagant theatricality and a vivid, intensely hued style. Nicki-aesthetics shares qualities with the sensibility of camp, as outlined in Susan Sontag's 1964 article "Notes on 'Camp,'" yet challenges camp's assumed association with white gay men as well as its reduction of women to objects (rather than subjects) within the camp universe. Nicki-aesthetics realigns blackness and camp as mutually constitutive (rather than oppositional) forms, while reconfiguring camp as a black female-centered practice. (McMillan 79)

Although perhaps no longer aligned with Black women, Lil Nas X's style is reminiscent of many aspects of Nicki-aesthetics, particularly as Black queer camp practice. While his camp influences may stem from several sources, most of those sources were circulating in popular culture during Lil Nas X's formative years, and therefore his expression of Black queer camp reflects his distinct generational position.

All these influences, as well as many more, manifest throughout Lil Nas X's

oeuvre as a particularly Black queer Gen Z aesthetic that pushes against hip hop's heteronormative assumptions. This is apparent in all the interconnected aspects of Lil Nas X's digital presence but is especially clear in many of his music videos, which often center queer narratives and challenge preconceptions about race, gender, and sexuality. For example, the rapper has offered nonbinary or gender non-conforming characters, especially in the video for "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)." In playing each of these characters in a CGI animated video that reimagines biblical storytelling through a decidedly queer lens, Lil Nas X encourages us to think through new "queer forms, queer beings, queer modes of play" as Jack Halberstam has suggested of queer games (188). The use of CGI is particularly apt, because, as Halberstam writes: "CGI changed the face of animation, not simply because we shifted from 2D to 3D – since apparently most spectators do not register this shift when immersed in the film – but because the shift from analog to digital, from linear to fractal, made other stories, relations, and outcomes possible" (188). While these videos are not games, they are playful reimagining of new worlds that expand queer potentialities.

Lil Nas X uses a plethora of generational influences to protest homophobic gatekeeping in the music industry. His aesthetic approach combines a bricolage of available text and media objects and discourses, filtered through a camp sensibility, manifested as a Black queer practice. In addition to drawing on internet and television cultures, he also draws on aesthetics and narrative practices of video games, another ubiquitous media of the digital age. "Late To Da Party (F*CK BET)" is an explicitly clear example of this approach and is best understood through the lens of queer ludonarratology.

"Late To Da Party" as Queer Ludonarrative Text

As Tison Pugh writes, "Many narratives feature games, many games feature narratives, and ludonarratology, a hybrid hermeneutic, asks readers and players alike to ponder their multiple points of intersection and shared structure, as well as the variety of meanings that inevitably arise in the generative space between form and content" (1-2). Ludonarratology, as a frame for analysis, "refers to the theories and structures of gaming narratives and narrative games, those constitutive factors (such as discourses, rules, players, and gamemasters) necessary for their status as such" (Pugh 12). While narratives and games often share some themes and structures, such as plots in which a protagonist encounters

some conflict and undergoes a series of trials to emerge as a victor or resolve the conflict, there are key differences between them, particularly involving the role of audience or player. In a game, a player has agency, even if their agency is bound by a set number of available options and rules. An audience or reader of a narrative text cannot engage with the text in the same way, cannot typically manipulate the medium or change outcomes in real time.

Yet, there can be overlap between narrative and ludology; many games rely on narratives and often narratives incorporate some games.[4] In the new digital media landscape, this is a particularly fruitful space for analysis because it accounts for the ways in which "story lines unfold and are adapted across a wide range of forms (including literature, drama, film, television, video games, board games, graphic novels, among others) and which is characterized by remediation, convergence, intermediality, transmediality, paratextuality, and story worlds (or world making)" (Pugh 40). In this case, the queer potential of the media, through both the overlap of narrative and ludology and the referential use of multiple types of media, is heightened. Pugh writes:

> Ludology and narratology, in effect, potentially queer each other, exposing their respective blind spots in overlooking characters and players, desires and identities, neglected by ideological regimes. Similarly, queerness and its subversive effects are better understood through the illuminating disruptions of ludic narrativity, with gaming narratives and narrative games creating fissures of form that call into question long-standing presumption of their cultural meaning. Queer experiences, those untethered to normative codes of desire and gendered identity, flourish when the rules of a game and the structures of a narrative simultaneously shift and merge (2).

In other words, a queer ludonarrative approach that disrupts expectations of normative narrative and gaming practices has the potential to queer both through "disruptions of ideological normativity," allowing "unexpected, unsanctioned, and otherwise marginalized genders, sexualities, and identities to surface" (Pugh 44). Queer ludonarratology, then, through either gaming narratives or narratives in

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[4] For example, even the most recent *Legend of Zelda* games for the Nintendo Switch platform (*Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom*), which are notable for being open-world games that players can freely explore, incorporate narratives that unfold as the player progresses and unlocks cutscenes, which are unplayable videos that serve to advance the narrative. Similarly, often narrative media such as film or television involves games, such as the 2020 miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*, which centers on a chess champion protagonist.

games, is a framework for understanding how ludonarrative approaches can create new possibilities for queer structures, queer stories, and queer representation.

The video for "Late To Da Party" does this work by augmenting the song with a video game narrative, which is also a queer ludonarrative, to depict a story of the rapper's journey to and conquest of the BET Award show. In this depiction, Lil Nas X plays both the protagonist of the game and the gamemaster (the person who organizes and moderates the game, controls the narrative, and who often sets the rules of play), as the video alternates between images of the rapper at the computer and compiling materials for his video game, and as he goes through the trials and ultimately performs in the final stage. Throughout, we see him both succeeding in the narrative and reconstructing the narrative to ensure and highlight his own successes. As in his previous work in which he actively constructs new, queer worlds, Lil Nas X uses this video to show both his acumen in the game and to reconfigure the game altogether. In what follows I will examine the video as a queer ludonarrative text.

The video opens with images of the cover artwork for the single, which features a BET Award statue in a toilet being urinated on, actively being photoshopped together while the lines "Fuck BET" repeat over a beat.[5] The camera angle then pulls away from the computer screen where this work is being done to reveal a bespectacled Lil Nas X in a dark studio intensely at work at the computer piecing together these images and video. His hands move with blurred quickness, and he is absorbed in the project, finally lifting a foot ensconced in a platform boot to aid in hitting the keyboard, right on beat.

We are again immersed in the video game taking shape on the computer, where background images flash by to remind us of Lil Nas X's previous work, including stills from previous videos such as "INDUSTRY BABY." Many of these images display the Shutterstock watermark, suggesting that this project is not only do-it-yourself (DIY) but also potentially low budget. The process of constructing the game is as evident here as the game itself. As these images flash by in turn, Lil Nas X raps in the first verse both sexually suggestive and braggadocio lines, such as "look at how I top shit" (a queer double-entendre), and "I just put like three in the top ten" (referencing the three top ten hit singles he had in the previous year). At the height of this success he traces in verse, the

[5] This imagery, which is also the cover art for the single, is a reference to rapper Ye (formerly known as Kanye West) posting a video of himself urinating on a Grammy statuette on Twitter in 2020.

rapper is shown getting into a photoshopped private jet, where he greats two pilots (played by Denzel Baptiste and David Biral, also known collectively as the duo Take a Daytrip, who produced the track) and revels in affluence as he raps about making a profit and wearing luxury (Chanel) brands, status items and evidence of his previous conquests.

In the next section the perspective alternates between that of Lil Nas X the protagonist on his private jet and Lil Nas X the gamemaster constructing the video(game) from his studio. With an effete gesture to remind us of his queer inclinations, protagonist Lil Nas X jumps out of the plane and falls in the direction of an inserted house emoji crudely labeled "YB's House," the location of the collaborator on the track, YoungBoy Never Broke Again, or NBA YoungBoy. With the click of gamemaster Lil Nas X's keyboard, he lands first in a blue sports car, as he races past intentionally fake scenery and raps the hook, "Don't try me / You better save that shit for somebody else / Don't try me / 'Cause bitch I can't be late to the party." These lines are a direct address to BET and any other detractors warning them not to stand in his way to success, which he is rapidly approaching (as illustrated by his position behind the wheel of a powerfully fast sports car). As the blue sports car arrives at the house, protagonist Lil Nas X pulls up and runs up the steps to knock on the front door.

The knock is echoed in the gamemaster Lil Nas X's reality, as the video pulls away again to the studio and Lil Nas X looks away from the computer screen in the direction of a doorbell ringing. The instrumental shifts, as "Late To Da Party" stops and instead we hear diegetic music in the form of "Down Souf Hoes," an unreleased track Lil Nas X recorded with another queer rapper, Saucy Santana. Gamemaster Lil Nas X gets up from his workstation and the scene cuts to him opening the front door of his house, where he finds a package on his doorstep. The package is a giant USB flash drive that has a blurry label from which we can make out "YB FOOTAGE." When Lil Nas X picks up the package, it triggers a sound that in a video game would suggest a character has discovered a treasure or a tool that will be useful in their quest. The label on top of the package states "To: Nas From: YB."

Lil Nas X takes the giant flash drive back to the studio and plugs it into the computer, and an icon appears on the computer's desktop. When gamemaster Lil Nas X clicks the icon, "Late To Da Party" resumes as the audience is again engrossed in the computer screen, this time in a scene that looks like a video game in which a man wielding a samurai sword is attacking a woman. The camera pulls

away and we see the game on screen is being played by YoungBoy himself, who is rapping his feature while playing this game from a room in his own house. The video game aspects of the video are especially apparent in this sequence, as Lil Nas X uses the item that he found to advance his quest, and we see YoungBoy as both character in a separate game (a game within the game) and as the player within Lil Nas X's game that controls that character. He never has gamemaster status, though, a point to which I will return.

The music video continues to shift between meta layers of game and video, and we see YoungBoy as if he is now in the computer screen — this is the footage that gamemaster Lil Nas X, along with Baptiste and Biral of Take a Daytrip, are going over in the studio and piecing together into the larger work. Lil Nas X hits a button on the keyboard and places the protagonist version of himself into the footage as the pre-chorus returns with him performing it. Interspersed with shifts back to the studio/gamemaster Lil Nas X, we see YoungBoy and Lil Nas X together as the scene behind them shuffles to show stock images of various rooms with their Shutterstock and Getty Images watermarks intact. Protagonist and gamemaster Lil Nas X share the third verse, in which he raps, "Hmm, get, window double tinted/ Face is sitting pretty, you bitches wouldn't get it / I'm at Met Gala in Versace and it's fitted, uh/ farted on these niggas, oops, I think I shitted." Here the typical rap boasts about materiality (fancy cars, designer clothes) are amended with nods to Lil Nas X's queer expressions and weaponized against his detractors. For example, "face is sitting pretty" combines "sitting pretty," a reference to the rapper's comfortable financial position, with "giving face" or "serving face," a reference to Black and Latinx queer subcultures such as Ballroom and drag cultures, that means looking beautiful and relates to the Ballroom competition category of Face, in which participants compete for the best physical facial features. The reference would go unnoticed by listeners not familiar with this queer of color subculture—those "bitches" wouldn't get it. The following line references his three custom-designed looks by the Italian fashion house, who described the outfits as telling a "three-part LGBTQ+ American fairytale":

> [Lil Nas X] arrived on the red carpet in a dramatic cape that exudes regality and represents concealing one's true self. The cape was then shed to reveal gleaming Medusa-adorned armor, a symbol of protection from the prejudices faced as a Black, queer person. Finally, the armor is removed to reveal a skin-tight bodysuit that represents living life as your

true, unguarded self (Versace).

The reference here exudes not only fashion and luxury, but also the intentional queer undertones of the outfits. In the final line of the verse, however, Lil Nas X interrupts this vision of *haute couture* with imagery of desecration and domination: “shitting on,” or dominating, his enemies. These lines encapsulate his assertiveness about identifying as queer, but also his irreverence, particularly toward institutions such as BET.

Gamemaster Lil Nas X manipulates the footage so that protagonist Lil Nas X is again driving his blue sports car with YoungBoy in the passenger seat as they race with alternating desert and city landscapes passing them by. They arrive at nightfall to a city with a hand drawn rendition of the BET Awards logo indicating to viewers that they have reached their destination, the final stage (both in the sense of performance and of video game narrative, in which the final stage often requires a fight to vanquish the final boss, or bad guy) of this odyssey. Gamemaster Lil Nas X puts protagonist Lil Nas X on the stage of the BET awards with a rainbow flag draped over him like a cape as he repeats the opening and closing lines, “Fuck BET.” Television monitors around the stage multiple his image as he holds stacks of cash, throws some of that cash at the audience, and holds the stacks up to his ear like a phone. Lil Nas X thus conquers BET, the final boss, by performing on its biggest stage in his gayest apparel while enjoying the financial rewards of commercial success.

YoungBoy’s presence in this video might seem like an odd choice for a queer narrative. The rapper is known as much for his music as he is for his family life: at just twenty-four years old he is the father to eleven children with multiple women. He has collaborated in the past with Boosie Badazz (formerly known as Lil Boosie), a fellow Baton Rouge native who is known for homophobic comments, including those he made against Lil Nas X in 2021. Even his verses in this song emphasize heterosexual couplings (“He want X’, I’m liking his sister,” he raps). However, YoungBoy’s role on “Late to Da Party” is to act as sidekick to the queer rapper. Indeed, Lil Nas X is always in control. For example, as the end credits of the video play, we see YoungBoy parachuting into his house, nonchalant, placed in just the right spot by an unseen gamemaster Lil Nas X as indicated by the audible clicking of his mouse. Gamemaster Lil Nas X puts the featured artist back where his protagonist found him, safe and sound at the end of the adventure. In this video, it is the queer artist who manipulates and controls the heterosexual one. The seemingly unlikely collaboration further breaks down

divisions in hip hop between heterosexual, hard living rappers and their queer counterparts, another (false) binary that Lil Nas X shatters through this ludonarrative.

Although this is a music video, the reliance on a gaming narrative necessitates an analytical framework that considers “Late To Da Party” as a queer game. In the introduction to their volume *Queer Game Studies*, Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg note that “Games in all of their manifestations are a powerful place to imagine a queer utopia, not simply imagining a better world but by giving players/makers/scholars the tools for enacting new and better worlds” (xi). Edmond Y. Chang further notes that queer gaming specifically is “heterogeneity of play, imagining different, even radical game narratives, interfaces, avatars, mechanics, soundscapes, programming, platforms, playerships, and communities” (15). While “Late To Da Party” might not depict a queer utopia per se, it is an example of queer gaming because it uses the framework of a game to reimagine a series of events in which a queer protagonist not only wins the game but rewrites the game itself.

As he told *Rolling Stone*, Lil Nas X’s criticisms of BET did not begin with the 2022 award nominations (Millman). The rapper and his associates relayed that their tense relationship began during the previous year’s award ceremony, when he performed his hit song “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name).” They noted that before they were approved to do the performance, they had to confirm to the network that the rapper was not a “satanist or devil worshiper” (Millman). To ease concerns, Lil Nas X’s performance took on an ancient Egyptian theme rather than the biblical setting of the music video, but the network was reportedly upset when the gay rapper kissed one of his male backup dancers at the end of the song (Millman). The rapper since has repeatedly critiqued the network for what he perceives as homophobia, which he further claimed resulted in his being shut out of the 2022 award nominations. “Late To Da Party” was an additional and decidedly non-respectable critique of the network’s respectability politics that tend to exclude queerness.

In the video for “Late To Da Party,” Lil Nas X portrays himself as both the game’s protagonist and the gamemaster, situating himself as both victor and the ultimate authority who controls what happens in this game world. As Pugh notes, “It is the gamemaster, the ludonarrative fabricator, who wields supreme authority in creating the ludic event yet who, in most instances, stands removed from its play” (130). Gamemaster Lil Nas X controls the world, recreates the journey up to

the BET Awards as one that can be successfully "won" or conquered by a queer protagonist. Here, however, the gamemaster, or a version of the gamemaster is no longer removed but is the key player, in collaboration with the featured artist. Rather than being shut out of the awards, the game is to get to the awards show stage, where his conquest is his performance. In using BET's name in the title and throughout the song and video, Lil Nas X takes an antagonistic approach that moves beyond satire and firmly into the realm of online trolling. "Late To Da Party" uses queer ludonarrative logics as a form of resistance against homophobic gatekeeping and respectability politics that police Black queer performers and performances.

Conclusion: Queer Ludonarrativity as Gen Z Resistance

Queer ludonarratology provides a useful lens for examining ways Lil Nas X, as a Gen Z rapper, combines various aesthetic influences in the digital media landscape to imagine new Black queer possibilities in hip hop. Halberstam notes that queers often "hack" digital worlds to make themselves legible: "Queer subjects constantly recode and, within limits, rebuild the worlds they enter. Since the world as we know it was not designed for queer subjects, then queer subjects have to hack straight narratives and insert their own algorithms for time, space, life, and desire" (187). In "Late To Da Party," Lil Nas X pulls back the curtain to show, through fictional narrative, how he rebuilds worlds that might resist acknowledging Black queer excellence. By playing both gamemaster and protagonist, Lil Nas X builds his own game world to set himself up for victory within it.

Gen Z has been heavily influenced by internet cultures as well as Black queer cultures, and those influences are evidenced in Lil Nas X's music videos. Additionally, Gen Z approaches to gender and sexuality, which are in many ways more inclusive of fluidity and expansiveness than previous generations, are also reflected in his work. "Late To Da Party" features much of the rap braggadocio and self-assertion of previous generations of rappers, but it also reflects Lil Nas X's desire for institutions to break out of outdated, binary modes of thinking. The queer ludonarrative approach of this and his other music videos synthesizes internet and gaming culture aesthetics, hip hop traditions, and Black queer expressions into a form of queer of color critique. While "Late To Da Party" illustrates Lil Nas X's use of queer ludonarratology to combat homophobia and

industry gatekeeping, the rapper's broader engagements with internet, gaming, and television cultures in hip hop reflects the shifting attitudes and aesthetics of his generation.

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